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ABSTRACT

Many teachers use grades as a weapon or a defense--not as the powerful learning tool they can be. A grading system in which students write papers over and over until they are fully acceptable, and in which they earn checkmarks for each piece of work accepted, serves as a powerful motivator. The checkmark system adheres to six primary learning principles: the problem--in this case, to write acceptable papers--appears genuine to students; motivation is intense and continuous; students know their rate of progress; they are not permitted to develop incorrect habits; they face challenges and successfully reach goals; and they work at their own individual speeds. Although the number of papers handled by teachers increases with this method, it is easier for teachers to grade the papers, since the emphasis is on helping students improve their work rather than on justifying an assigned grade; and although problems may arise that must be worked out by teachers, this grading system, on the whole has great advantages for both teachers and students. (GW)

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THE PSYCHOLOGY OF GRADING SKILL LEARNING

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Once upon a time--oh, many many papers ago--as time is calculated by communication teachers, I was temporarily transported from the familiar disciplines of secretarial training to the lively creativity of business communication.

Because I had spent a good bit of my life writing business communications for wages and a few more years drilling shorthand students in sentence structure and grammar, I naively expected to have no trouble teaching this incredible complexity of personal experience, knowledge of business operations, grammar drills, and emotional factors called "Business Letter Writing."

So much for innocence! It lasted a week--to the day the first traditional "try-out" problem was handed in for "introductory" grading. The problem was short and simple; the preparation for writing was intense; the results were appalling!

And in this case students were lucky, no matter how hard I try at times, the "Peter Principle" does NOT work in reverse. I had made it through the week with platitudes--"You won't need a grade and assignment sheet until we have something to grade."

So now I could read these pathetic attempts to communicate without having to fit them into a prestructured grading system. Had I promised to use the traditional ABC/F system, I would have been faced with telling the sad truth to students or lying to them. Neither is a promising way to begin the term. A class full of failing grades (however well deserved) doesn't do much for morale and a good learning atmosphere. The same number of "opening C" grades sets a tone of nonexcellence which is difficult to break when students hold evidence of "passing" work.

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So I read the papers, pausing only occasionally when reflex action made me drop in a punctuation mark or circle a misspelled word. When I finished, I remembered typing classes on the first day I asked for papers. Some students dropped the papers and literally ran from the classroom. Many papers deliberately had false names in the upper right corner. Some students begged, "Can't I turn in a paper tomorrow? My machine 'messed up' today." The sophisticated crowd made remarks, "Tain't much--but it's all mine!" Some asked, "Do the mistakes count off?"

In many years, I'd discovered that the timing of that first hand-in paper made no difference in initial reactions. . . a day or a week, did not make students proud of their first typing papers. And I'd learned something else about early learning papers: If I kept them or threw them away, students believed for many weeks that I had secretly graded the feeble efforts and put the grades in a special "get even" file. Some later papers could be held or destroyed. These first ones had to be returned to students as an article of faith.

But most students in typing classes do learn to type with varying degrees of expertise. The fastest, most accurate typists had

1. good teaching
2. lots of practice and
3. a success-oriented grading system.

Methods course, workshops, professional magazines, Saturday seminars--all these concentrate on helping to improve <u>teaching</u>. We still [illegible] with the myth of perfectability--<u>our</u> own. If we can become good enough <u>teachers</u>, students will learn and grading will cease to be a "problem."

I submit: One reason grading is a "problem" is simply that most teachers use grades as a weapon or a defense--not as the powerful <u>learning tool</u> they can be.

Think back. When have you really studied "grading?"

Your required education course in "Educational Tests and Measurements" told you statistically how to construct and validate a testing instrument. You learned how to test and how to manipulate scores carefully but you avoided two issues:

1. What questions should be on a test in a given class?
2. How are test scores used in a total grading system for that class?

Many of you have attended professionally conducted or do-it-yourself "Help" sessions. You trade ideas and bring along your evaluation sheets to show how well your system works.

Yes, you get good ideas from these sessions; but again, you're not looking at the psychology which constantly operates in the grading process--whether or not you like it.

Today let's examine a few key concepts--concepts which operate with or without your permission. If your grading system violates some basic psychological principles which govern skill learning, you involuntarily impede normal learning. In extreme cases, you not only inhibit learning but actually cause regressions in skill performance.

Of course, we must first agree that much of writing (and communication, for that matter) is, indeed, a skill . . . and therefore learned in the same manner as walking, talking, typing or knitting. Ultimately, how gracefully we walk, how fluidly we talk, how accurately we type, and how rapidly we knit are influenced by two factors:

1. Personal limitations
2. Personal motivation

A grading system cannot, in itself, correct or reduce personal limitations. However, a grading system can be used as a powerful motivator to help students want to overcome some personal limitations and to use the skills they have at the highest level.

Let us consider six primary principles. These psychological learning principles are more or less universally accepted and proved. You will find them phrased differently in various books which discuss strategies of teaching and learning. The phraseology here is from Mursell's Psychology for Modern Education.

1. Problems must appear genuine to the student.
2. Learning proceeds more readily when motivation is intense and continuous.
3. The student's efficiency of learning increases when he knows his rate of progress.
4. If the student is allowed to develop a skill in which he forms incorrect habits, it is hard to break these habits and to form better ones.
5. As the student learns, personality is developed and attitudes and concepts are formed through the facing of challenges and successful reaching of goals.
6. The speed of learning varies greatly within any group of students.

You will find other principles which have connection with the psychology of grading but these six will receive attention today as we think how they operate in the grading process.

As long as we teach semester and year courses based on a carefully selected textbook, the first principles will continue to be a primary problem: "The problem must appear genuine to the student." The fact is that no matter how hard we try to make a writing problem from the book genuine and relevant to students, we cannot. The problem is obviously from a book and therefore not from the real world.

But because problems must be genuine to the student, the student does the only thing he can do. He makes the problems genuine. The problem for the student is not to write a letter granting a $20 refund. The problem is to write something that the teacher will pass. Passing a course--even in this era when grades seem to be less of a motivator then they once were--is still

a genuine goal. Performing in such a way as to attain a passing grade is a real problem to the student. Therefore, the student approaches a problem trying only to write something that will pass--a legitimate goal.

A few students have even lower goals; their problem is not so much "passing" but avoiding ridicule and punishment. For these people, writing a letter which receives a grade of E is still a genuine relevant problem.

Traditional grading systems require that a teacher read a paper once, assess its worth, take off points for unsatisfactory work, grade the paper, and return it. This grading method makes it easy for the student to solve what he perceives to be his real problem--getting some kind of mark in the teacher's book.

A grading system which requires the student to continue to work with his problem after the first attempt heightens student interest in the teacher's real purpose which is to "solve" the book problem. The most common way writing teachers utilize this psychological principle is in requiring rewrites. And well they should, for the practice of requiring rewrites is closely tied to our second principle: "Learning proceeds more readily when motivation is intense and continuous."

If we accept the premise that the student does change the problem from "solving" to "passing," the second psychological principle becomes very important. In the rewrite process, the student's problem is to get the paper accepted. The internal motivation the student provides to get the paper accepted is intense, and it is continuous--until such time as the paper is finally accepted.

The matter of how a teacher evaluates rewrites become a primary factor in using grades as a tool rather than as a weapon. In anxiety to motivate students to do the best possible job in the shortest possible time, the most common rewrite systems are often not the ones that provide the best motivation for students.

1. Some teachers allow one rewrite.

2. Some teachers allow a number of rewrites; but each time the paper is turned in, the grade is automatically lowered one notch.

3. Some teachers have policies allowing rewrites of certain material but not other material.

Let us consider what happens to the student with each of these systems.

If the teacher allows one rewrite, a student who is externally motivated by desire for a high grade will probably try to do a better job the second time than the first. Many students are not motivated by grades and the rewrite is done solely to solve the student's genuine problem of getting a mark in the book.

A teacher who allows rewrites on a decreasing value scale does not do much to provide intense continous high motivation to the student. The student is faced with a situation in which he must work harder to get fewer and fewer points. Not many of us really enjoy working harder and harder for smaller reward. Why should we expect our students to do it? And, of course, in this system, the student eventually reaches a point where he can receive only a failing grade for the paper; he has again solved his problem of getting a mark in the book.

If the teacher uses a variable rewrite process, students inquire before the assignment is given if this assignment will require rewriting. Students approach each problem with a different internal motivation—not a continuous, intense motivation.

A checkmark or "Do-it-over-til-you-do-it-right" system eliminates these problems. The student receives no credit for a piece of work until he receives full credit. Teachers must be careful not to call full credit "A." The work is simply "acceptable." I define "acceptable" as letters I would not be ashamed to sign if I were working in an office. This definition helps to make writing problems relevant to the business world, and it allows a certain amount of latitude, I can define "acceptable" as a letter I would sign at 4:45 or I can define

"acceptable" as a letter I would sign at 9 in the morning. A final grade for the course or section of a course is determined by the total number of checkmarks, gold stars, or smiling faces which are recorded in the teacher's grade book.

"The student's efficiency of learning increases when he knows his rate of progress." The checkmark system facilitates Principle 3. No longer is his grade a secret hidden in hieroglyphics in the teacher's grade book. Instead, the student has firm evidence of exactly how many checkmarks he has earned. If the student is not interested in grades, wants merely to get the assignment "done," he has again firm evidence of his own personal rate of progress. Students can not hope that the teacher will somehow find a way to give a higher grade than that which is earned by checkmarks. Students also cannot blame the teacher for a grade because the evidence of work accomplished is in the student's hand rather than in the teacher's grade book. Furthermore, the student has gained some control over his rate of progress. He is no longer totally dependent on the teacher to control how rapidly success is achieved.

Let's see what this kind of system does for the learning process in general. Principle 4: "If a student is allowed to develop a skill in which he forms incorrect habits, it is hard to break these habits and form better ones." We all know that early attempts to write well are at best weak. Teachers who use a penalty gradeing system are forced early in each writing term to award grades higher than students have really earned; otherwise all papers will be returned as failing papers. We all know that nothing succeeds like success; and, therefore, we rationalize that we will tighten up standards during the year and the paper which we call "C" at the beginning of the term will be failed at the end of the term. We probably know this isn't a very good idea but we have to do something! We are allowing students to receive credit for learning incorrect habits. We reward people for doing a poor job, and we continue to reward them: anytime we grade a paper that is less than acceptable, we allow students to confirm

incorrect writing habits.

On the other hand, if, from the outset, students are required to write letters with complete sentences, use the dictionary and most of the commonly accepted punctuation marks, more classroom time is free to talk about the psychology of writing, to discuss business procedure, or other topics. By simply not accepting an assignment until it does resemble a business letter, we do not allow students the luxury of developing incorrect habits. By the same token, we do not find ourselves in the position of trying to break the bad habits late in the term by tightening grading standards.

Let's see how a check system works with our fifth principle: "As the student learns, his personality and attitudes and concepts are formed through facing challenges and successful reaching of goals." We tend to forget that all students learn in all our classes. They may learn many unpleasant bad habits of non-success if they have a record of failure. They have learned to fail. If, on the other hand, they can attend classes and find some measure of success in learning, they absorb a different set of attitudes and concepts.

A checkmark system of grading assures some successful experiences. A student is no longer a solid "C" (or a solid "D"). Each paper a student completes is a successful paper. The student learns the habits of success. In many writing classes, students with even a grade of B have never written one really good letter. A checkmark system forces students to write excellent letters. They may not complete as many letters, but each one serves as a personal model of excellence. In this way students tend to snowball their successes. After one letter is accepted, it's not so hard to get the second; and quicker to get the third. With good luck and good management, students will produce some letters which never need to be redone at all because of Principle 5: "As the student learns, his personality, attitudes, and concepts are formed from the facing of challenges and successful reading of goals."

These are five major considerations connected with a checkmark grading

system. If I have convinced you to think about the effectiveness of this system of grading, you will find many other psychological principles listed in behavioral psychology books and in teaching strategy books.

I have added this 6th principle as a launching pad to some practical classroom considerations: "The speed of learning varies greatly within any group of students." We all know this; but we do not make assignments as though it were true. Nor do our normal grading procedures reflect this fact. "Everyone should have a good letter of application on Tuesday," but a rewrite system allows some people to rewrite the letter several times before it becomes a good letter a week from Tuesday.

Some of you have probably contemplated an "all-or-nothing" method of grading and discarded it as impractical simply because of the volume of paper you would handle. Others have not thought about this system but as I mention it you're thinking, "Heavens, how many letters will I have to read?" So I close this presentation with a recitation of some experiences which we have had in using checkmark grading. Most of them have been the practical result of principle 6: "The speed of learning varies greatly within any group of students."

I got into this method of grading because I was concerned with what is the best way for students to learn a skill. I had never graded communication papers in any other system so it never occurred to me that there were methods which might involve less paper handling. As I have had the experience of involving other teachers in using variations of a checkmark grading system, I have found that this system has advantages not only for the students but for the teacher, as well.

May I suggest first that if you contemplate experimenting with this totally new grading concept, you take care of your own psychological needs by using the system for only part of your grading program at first. Continue to use some of your normal program. Buffer this new grading system until you see what kind of advantages it holds for your class.

A second cardinal rule if you decide to experiment with this grading system is not to use somebody else's plan. The plan is totally flexible. To appreciate it fully you must leave yourself free to react to the successes of your students. Do not try to use someone else's class as the guideline for your class.

One final general remark before we get into some specifics. Half the benefits of this system occur in the mind of the teacher. If you once accept the fact that grades can be a learning tool rather than a defense of teacher judgment, there are no limits to the inventive ways you can use sound psychological principles to help students learn while you correct papers and show them the errors of their ways.

Now let's look at some specifics--the amount of paper that a perfection system can generate. You will handle almost every assignment at least twice. In some cases, for some students, you will handle papers four or five times. This is an increased amount of paper handling, but let's look at the way you tackley the papers.

If you are presently using an ABC system or any "subtract-points-for-errors" system, you must take all the time you need to justify the grade on each paper. Otherwise, you are in for endless arguments. Using a checkmark system, the burden of proof is on the student, not the teacher. Some teachers use only three correction symbols: an exclamation point next to some part of the letter which is well written, a question mark next to parts of the letter which needs some clarification, and "NO" next to parts of the letter which do not conform to good usage--in any way. I add a few "sp's" for spelling, insert commas and point out misplaced modifiers; but I do rely heavily on those three marks: "I, ?, and NO" to carry the heavy burden of marking papers. I hand back papers at the beginning of a period, allow time for students to consult with each other and with me (some comments are public, some private). Interest during class is automatically positive--on learning how to make this letter acceptable.

The paper itself provides the best kind of internal motivation to improve writing skills.

You, the teacher, also want this paper to be acceptable so you do not have to handle it more than one time. For the first time in your teaching life, you and the students are facing exactly the same challenge in the classroom. You both want acceptable papers.

The system also promotes another change in the class. In the early part of any term, no papers in the class are acceptable as first turned in. Therefore everyone in class is in the same boat. Arranging work and study groups is a lot easier if everyone in class has exactly the same personal goal.

Until you've tried it, you cannot appreciate another freedom--the freedom to talk about an ungraded paper. Because the paper is a symbol of hope--not disgrace--students welcome criticism.

There are some negatives. Every school has its horror story. Some new converts to a checkmark system allow students to turn in papers as many times as they wish and set no deadlines. And some students take advantage of the freedom to turn some papers in 15 to 20 times. Each time the paper was returned, the student made exactly the corrections mentioned and no others. How do you prevent this kind of abuse? Well, of course, for one thing you set certain deadlines. Some letters must be accepted by "x" date or be forgotten. In truth, setting dealines violates several principles but until Utopia, we must be practical.

Students understand the situation, and they don't like having unacceptable papers on their desks. They want the work on your desk! And they DO return most papers rapidly.

Discouraging students from using the services of the teacher as a proofreader requires a little more thought. Again, we go back to principle 1: "Problems must appear genuine to the students." The student's problem is not really to write good letters but acceptable ones. Students will appreciate all the help the teacher will give. If the teacher gives unlimited free proofreading help,

only the dullest of students will eschew the help. Yet some students who are very weak in grammar fundamentals must have a great deal of such assistance in order to begin to learn correct spelling, grammar, and syntax.

One of the best solutions is to use a combination of the check system and the point grading system. Major, complex tasks such as writing letters, memos, and reports are scored exclusively with the checkmark system. Work must be acceptable to receive credit. According to the needs of your curriculum, you set this major, complex score at 50%, 60%, or 70% of a final grade. The remaining portion of the grade is determined by some kind of point system. You award points for those things that seem to need reward. For instance, biggest bonuses go to students who turn in papers the fewest times. If you wish to emphasize several basic tools during the term, give bonus points to students who show that they can effectively use the tool. For instance, if you have been working with spelling and dictionaries, you award points for letters which have no spelling mistakes. The letter may be rewritten, but it receives points for having no spelling mistakes. If you emphasize commas and semicolons, points are awarded to letter which use commas and semicolons properly--even though the letter is not acceptable. You must, of coure, do careful advanced planning to be sure that students won't assure themselves of an "A" in bonus points long before the end of term.

Finally, let's consider reading this volume of paper. The first reading of a new letter will take almost as long as it ever took. But now your purpose is to help the students, not explain the grade. Therefore, you can use shorter more blunt remarks in the margin. Your marking will not take as long as when you must justify a grade. And you can have the pleasure of helping the very good writer become excellent. When you receive a paper the second time, it will be attached to the first copy. A quick look tells you where you must put your attention on the second reading. You will not spend as long on the rewrite as

on a normal paper because you have done the hard correcting job the first time. Each time you read the same paper, it takes less time. Near the end of a deadline period, a stack of papers four to five inches high can be reduced to zero in less than an hour because students have reduced their errors to zero.

You don't spend more time. You distribute time a different way. Most important, the time spent is part of the teaching/learning process--not part of the adversary judgment process. The difference in mental attitude alone is worth its weight in gold.

I hope I have convinced you to experiment with checkmark grading. It is psychologically sound and will help promote learning in your classroom. If you're not convinced, at least copy these six learning principles:

1. Problems must appear genuine to the student.
2. Learning proceeds more readily when motivation is intense and continuous.
3. The student's efficiency of learning increases when he knows his rate of progress.
4. If the student is allowed to develop a skill in which he forms incorrect habits, it is hard to break these habits and to form better ones.
5. As the student learns, personality is developed and attitudes and concepts are formed through the facing of challenges and successful reaching of goals.
6. The speed of learning varies greatly with any group of students.

I'm sure your teaching procedures conform to these principles. But please go home and examine your grading procedures. Do something to make grading a part of the <u>learning</u> system in your classes.